



ACHIM SZEPANSKI 2024-01-12

MARX'S THEORY OF VALUE (2)

ECONOFICTION COMMODITY, MARX, MARXISM, MONEY, VALUE

2. simple and unfolded value form

We assume, on the one hand, with the so-called capital-logical reading (which, starting from Hans-Georg Backhaus, has been widely discussed as value form analysis since the 1968 student movement, especially in Germany, cf. Backhaus 1997/ Elbe 2008) and, on the other hand, following the semio-economic reading of the problem by Harald Strauß, that the representation of value forms from the simple to the unfolded to the general value form contains a formal explication of the conceptual figures of “self-similarity and reflexive form” (Strauß 2013: 159ff) (of commodities) and thus does not refer to the representation of certain historical phases of development before or in capitalism (simple commodity production). We

are therefore dealing with the problem of representing the “contemporaneous history” of capital, in and with which capital sets itself, a history for which Marx himself provided a catchy definition with regard to the aspect of the “contemporaneous”: “These preconditions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming – and therefore could not yet spring from its action as capital – now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as set by it – not as the result of its coming into being, but as the results of its existence.” (Marx 1974: 364) The expropriation of the immediate producers from their means of labor is presupposed for capital and thus it is in turn a set form, but also remains the permanently setting form of this expropriation. In a certain sense, the process of separating the producers from the means of production continues throughout the internal history of capitalism. If we follow Althusser's position, the auto-logic of capital, as Marx attempts to categorize it in *Capital*, is preceded by the necessity of an initially singular encounter between deterritorialized labour flows and capital flows, which emerged from the side of the labour flows in and with the processes of original accumulation and was described by Marx in the concluding chapter of *Capital* vol. 1 primarily as the separation of producers from their means of production, a process that Marx describes as the prehistory of capital. This must be understood as a singular, non-linear history, within which the relationship between workers and capital only most likely became necessary, for ultimately the incorporation of actors into the wage-labor relation did not necessarily result from the transformation of serfs into doubly free laborers, but when this happened historically, Marx could speak of the mass expropriation of the producers of the means of production as an abolition in the necessity of capitalist accumulation, as its secret premise, insofar as capitalist reproduction perpetuates the doubly free worker by subsuming him to a form process based on the appropriation of surplus value. Thus, capitalist accumulation implies the perpetual reproduction of the fundamental process of separation. This is the dynamic of an immanent static (Adorno), a becoming of social relations in and with which all fixations tend to be dissolved and the “law” of capitalist development nevertheless remains unchanged. Only from the perspective of fully developed, self-setting capital can the meaning of original accumulation, which itself has no inherent teleology, be explained. At the same time, with regard to the development of deterritorialized capitalist money flows, both the emergence of urban commercial capital in northern Italy and the absolutist state and its industrial-military complex must be taken into account, because the financing of wars in Europe in the 16th century was only possible through an economy that tended to prosper, which ultimately led to mercantilism and the development of manufactories.

Let us now finally turn to the various forms of value. Marx wants to read the equation $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity B}$ as an expression of value “ $x \text{ commodity A}$ is worth $y \text{ commodity B}$ ”, as an expression that indicates that commodities a) are certain quantities of different commodities (the parameters x and y denote quantities, while A and B symbolize specific types of commodities), b) are equated in a very specific form, insofar as the identity set by the sign “=” conceals a difference. At the same time, one could also say that in the expression of value, analogous to the meaning of the philosophical term “expression”, the expression envelops what is expressed, as long as it does not exist outside the expression. However, it is important to note here that Marx always analyzes economic expressions in terms of their possibility, indicating that they shift in the course of the representation of the self-similarity of value forms until they are finally exposed to the break (in the “transition” from

the general value form and money), in order to finally abandon the expressions completely to decay, which as a process of critique already points beyond the representation of the various concepts. In the expression itself, the rupture by which it is characterized is thus itself traced.

First of all, the problem at this point is that the expression of value, if it is written as an equation, requires a kind of dimensional equality, without which we are immediately faced with a logical contradiction, because 20 cubits of canvas are no more equal to 1 skirt than 5 apples are equal to 3 pears. The linguistic formulation explicating the equation “20 cubits of canvas are worth 1 skirt” can also be formulated as follows: “The value of 20 cubits of canvas = the value of 1 skirt”, a formula which, however, again expresses nothing but a tautology, because what Marx wants to explain, namely the value, he already presupposes by fixing the equation. (Cf. Ruben 1998: 21f.) To put it another way, it would have to be shown through the analysis of the simple form of value that commodities realize something like an ideal identity in a quantitative way. Putting equation and value expression into one another really does seem to pose a problem here, as long as one does not bring the differential (symbolic) determination of the value expression into play. And finally, one would have to show that this equation can only be read against the background of a third party, because the “value of the commodity” cannot be conceptually extracted purely from the factors of objecthood and relation. Hans-Joachim Lenger has pointed out that the proposition of the identity $A=A$ already points to a third, to a difference that precedes the equation, insofar as A has already doubled itself in $A=A$ and is therefore, as the first A , at the same time a third, so that the identity emerges from the repetition of difference. A is not simply identical with itself, but will have been identical with itself via a detour, whereby A as origin or as first is already deleted. (Cf. Lenger 2004: 68f.) Here again we are dealing with an “there is” that is to be understood as a difference to positivity, but which takes place in positivity itself. And this difference already touches on the non-representational and thus on value.

Within the “equation”, commodities A and B (in a relationship purely as such, i.e. independent of the exchange of commodities) stand opposite each other in a polar relationship, i.e. they occupy different positions: While commodity A is in relative value form (active), commodity B occupies the position of equivalent form (passive), whereby it is impossible for a commodity to be actualized in one of the two positions at the same time, although the positions can be virtually exchanged. With the possibility of changing places, commodity A possesses a weak passivity, because it must already have been assigned that it is active, while commodity B cannot be separated from a weak activity as a form of immediate exchangeability, so that, as Lenger has shown, *différance* is already integrated into the game here, in that it both gives and withdraws the moments of activity/passivity from the expression of value, whereby the object of Marx's theory at this point simply proves to be an impossible one. (ibid.)

Virtualization at this level thus implies that changes of position take place (changes of position are virtual and at the same time positions are given), but no commodity can actualize itself simultaneously in both forms (value form and equivalent form). (Cf. Strauß 2013: 159f.) The statement “20 cubits of canvas are worth 1 skirt” can therefore be supplemented by the statement “1 skirt is worth 20 cubits of canvas”, which establishes a relation back or equivalence. With the concepts of relative value form and equivalence form, Marx brought into play from the outset concepts of relation that are initially polar and at the same time mutually determined, insofar as one concept does not “function” without the other concept.

And it should be pointed out that the two commodities A and B, with their positioning as “relative value form” and “equivalent form”, are in an asymmetrical relation, which also means that the equation is characterized by a non-simultaneity of places at the moment of equation (currently the commodities can only be in one place), so that even with the simple value form one must assume an underdetermination of the expression or the fiction of a conclusion.

What does value expression mean at this point? Commodity A actively makes commodity B its expression of value and at the same time it expresses its value in itself via commodity B, and in this way it distinguishes itself from itself as an object of use. Marx writes: “By equating the other commodity with itself as value, it refers to itself as value. By referring to itself as value, it simultaneously distinguishes itself from itself as use-value.” (MEGA II/5: 30) This equation of commodity A with commodity B (by means of the production of self-similarity) suggests that commodity A would reflect its value in commodity B (whereby the natural form of commodity B would be transferred into a reflexive form), whereby Marx, with the formulation “expression of commodity A in the body of commodity B”, actually refers to the fact that commodity A expresses something in the expression of value or expresses its value, so that commodity B with its secondary use value is regarded as something, namely as a “mirror” of the value of commodity A. (MEGA II/6: 89) However, this mirroring includes an as-if, because commodity A does not, of course, appear before a mirror with its value, but this type of mirroring is solely the result of a formal determination that arises from the juxtaposition of the two commodities. (Cf. Strauß 2013: 160) As commodity A is related to commodity B as an equivalent, commodity B is regarded as an expression of the value of commodity A, whereby the validity in the semiotic dimension is to be understood as a symbol. Commodity B thus becomes the interpretant of the value of commodity A, but not of object A. Depending on which position commodities occupy within the expression of value, Marx ascribes to them either an active or a passive mode; he wants to show that commodity A, which is in the relative value form, effects something on the second commodity B that could never take place outside this relation, whereby commodity B in the reflexive form is initially the passive element, but as an object of use, which is regarded as an expression of the value of commodity A, it acquires the form of immediate exchangeability (and thus an active status). “The expression of the canvas value in the skirt imprints a new form on the skirt itself. In fact, what does the form of value of the canvas say? That the skirt is interchangeable with it. As it walks or lies, with skin and hair, in its natural form of skirt it now possesses the form of immediate interchangeability with other commodities, the form of an interchangeable use-value or equivalent.” (MEGA II/5: 29) (Through the potential reversal of its position, commodity B can also express its own value in itself via the detour of commodity A).

Hans-Joachim Lenger writes the following on this Marxian conceptual figure: “Rather, both places mark a difference that initially reveals itself as one of ‘activity’ and ‘passivity.’” (Lenger 2007) The fact that commodity A as an active moment passes through its other (commodity B as a passive moment) in order to return to itself is both indicated and concealed in the equal sign. At this point, Lenger adds Derrida’s famous figure of *différance* to Marx’s expression of value. (Lenger 2004: 75) Because commodity B is not actually expressed in the equation in the first place, but only helps commodity A to express value, a kind of “inexpressible postponement” is present in the expression itself at this point and with it a difference that remains as withdrawn as it is indicated, and thus this kind of equation is always already torn

by the postponement. Lenger emphasizes here the aspect of the (real) impossibility of the formula or the concept of the “value form”. He refers to Derrida, who writes here: “Every concept is inscribed by law in a chain or in a system in which it refers to the other, to the other concepts, through the systematic play of differences. Such a play, the *différance*, is not simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual process and system in general.” (Derrida 1976: 16) For Derrida, what he calls *différance* appears neither as active nor as passive; rather, *différance* announces a medial form, the play of difference (medium) and unity, and it is precisely in this respect that, according to Lenger, in Marx’s conceptual games around the expression of value, the deferral actually remains present as well as withdrawn, which to a certain extent corresponds to a difference that differentiates itself, which Marx continues to shift through the medium of money without ever being able to master it. Nor does this mastery succeed through the operation of reversing the expression of value, through its “reading backwards and forwards”, with which Marx establishes equivalence – rather, according to Lenger, it is only with the concept of capital that the structure itself comes to light with all its aspects of spatialization and temporalization, so that one must always remember that “no term that differs from others can function as the genealogical principle of a structure from which it itself first emerges.”¹

Peter Ruben makes an interesting attempt to formalize the simple value form when he resolves the tautology underlying the value equation – which immediately arises if the simple value form is read purely as an equation and not described as a differential expression – by using the linguistic statement value form “ $a/ = b$ ”, which indicates the concrete equality – exactly comparability – of commodities. With regard to the value expression, Ruben writes: “In it, the subject ‘a’ denotes the object of value determination, the object ‘b’ the means of value determination and the predicate ‘= b’ the property of the object a to be valued.” (Ruben 2008:93) And Ruben comes to the conclusion that this statement is compatible with Marx’s definition of the expression of value or with the polar opposite categories of value form and equivalent form. Here, the grammatical structure “commodity A is equivalent to commodity B” must be observed, in which A and B are distinguished as subject and object, whereby commodity A (active) is in “relative value form” and commodity B (passive) is in “equivalent form”. A is designated as the subject/object and B as the object, whereby the object B serves as a means of expressing the value of the object A, which also requires a predicate (property) through which a relationship of equivalence is given or established. In Ruben’s statement, commodity B stands as a reflexive form for the unity of the property of equality (predicate/ logical center) and the means of comparison, which is an object or an object of use. And thus the unity of property and object (which of course presupposes an analytical separation), which expresses equivalence, could be written down in a syntactically and logically flawless way. Paradoxically, commodity B as a reflexive form and thus as the actually passive element of the commodity relation simultaneously provides the active moment of differentiation in the course of the self-similarity of commodities A and B, in that it only puts commodity A into the form of accepting its own activity quasi like a reception. The reflexive form, which consists in the fact that commodity B, as the embodiment of the value of commodity A, simultaneously sets itself up as the body of its own value, contains the figure of a retroflexion here. Finally, it should be noted that the (logical) problem of the genesis of the value form is not precisely how value forms come about at all, but which transitions are necessary to get from the simple

to the general value form. Subsequently, in the context of the problem of representation, one could now decide in favor of a “logic” of representation by means of the conceptual unfolding from the simple to the unfolded to the general form of value, whereby money would be quasi “caught up” in its first function as a general measure of value. (Cf. Engster 2010) Or, as we do in any case, for the necessity of constructing conceptual problems, whereby (previous) constellations, systematics and argumentative positions are deconstructed or even destroyed at the respective conceptual structural level produced. At the same time, it could be shown that specific problems do not necessarily have to be resolved in appropriate conceptual relations, but require a further generation, assembly and systematization of concepts, so that new objects of knowledge (Althusser) emerge without, however, arriving at a conclusive system. In the simple value form, the conceptual postponement as a break and as a necessary transition is suggested by the randomness of the value expression alone, because of course any commodity can take the place of the relative value or equivalent form, whereby the common feature that is supposed to be characteristic of commodities, namely being a product of labor, is only indicated as a cipher. (Cf. Lenger 2004: 112ff.)

The so-called unfolded form of value is a multi-digit relation or an extended elementary theorem, which contains the statement that the value of commodity A can be expressed in a potentially infinite number of other commodities: $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity B} = v \text{ commodity C etc.,}$ which immediately shows that a) in the context of this series, it does not matter in which commodity commodity A expresses its value, whether perhaps in skirt, canvas, wheat, computer chips or some other object, b) each new type of commodity offered increases the quantity of commodities that can take the place of the equivalent form, so that the equivalent form is potentially open. Commodity A is in the position of the relative value form, against which all other commodities are virtually in the position of special equivalents. Marx writes in this regard: “However, the individual form of value passes by itself into a more complete form. By means of it the value of a commodity A is expressed only in a commodity of another kind. But the nature of this second commodity [...] is quite indifferent [...] The number of its possible expressions of value is limited only by the number of different kinds of commodities.” (MEW 23: 76) It is immediately apparent that even with this configuration of commodities it is by no means possible to establish stable and fixed relations within a commodity-money-capital system.

To illustrate the unfolded form of value, Ruben uses the propositional link “ $a \neq b \vee a = c \vee a = d \vee \dots$ ” This is an open chain of (self-similar) signifiers, in mathematical terms a non-exclusive disjunction or a potentially infinite adjunction, within which it is possible to replace commodity B in its function as predicate/means of comparison with a potentially infinite number of commodities. (Ruben 2008: 94) This kind of syntax of the concatenation of commodities, which contains various reflexive forms within itself, leads, as is easy to see, to an infinite progress, or to put it another way, commodity A is now (virtually) opposed to all types of commodities, as Marx states in the first edition of Capital. The infinite nature of the value expression of any commodity A is shown by the fact that every other commodity can represent it, but does not come to an end through its representation in all the other commodities. At this point it already seems possible to imagine a patchwork of diverging expressions of value, whereby each commodity, insofar as it is in the relative value form, potentially expresses its value in an infinite number of other commodities, while with the

realization of an expression of value each individual equivalent form excludes other equivalent forms. Commodity A is thus potentially confronted with all types of commodities, which means that a virtualization is present, but this cannot simultaneously be expressed as a realization. (Strauß 2013: 162) The number of all possible forms of value is ultimately equal to n ($n = 1; 2; \dots; N$).² With Marx's definition of the unfolded form of value, commodity A, which is in the relative form of value, would now be confronted with $n-1$ other commodities, all of which are potentially capable of assuming the position of the equivalent form, although these commodities cannot be combined with each other at will, but are mutually exclusive as equivalents in each realization. On the basis of the frequency implication assumed in the unfolded value form alone, no stability and consistency can be ascribed to such an economic system (and only capitalism is an economic system), but also because the problem of mutual exclusions exists here. In the disjunctive series, which allows x possible substitutes for commodity B, the difference is simultaneously unfolded and postponed, insofar as it is supposed to express value without ever being able to eliminate the difference as which value is unwound. To put it another way, insofar as each commodity can be the general equivalent for the relation of all other commodities to one another, and thus each commodity can place all other commodities in relation to one another, the commodities are only decisive for themselves, but cannot form an economic system as such, because the measure and mathem of the economic system always fall into any given commodity, and this inevitably leads to an infinite regress.

1) (Lenger 2007) In: Texte, <http://www.hjlenger.de/>. It should be emphasized once again at this point that the figure of the simple form of value should by no means be understood as a primal representation or even as the first reflection of any concrete exchange relation of a very specific historical period, as parts of Marx's orthodoxy with its ontologizing and transhistorical readings of Capital vol. 1 still practice today by inventing real-historical phases such as simple commodity production and simple circulation. In fact, a purely frequentist accumulation of acts of exchange would not lead to any stability in the economy; without the real existence of money and of money in the movement form of capital (in the context of individual and total capital), capitalist commodity production is simply not possible, which means that the conditions of economic stability in capitalism already prove to be those of a (logical-medial) formation/structure.

2) At this point, it seems appropriate to briefly point out the difference between the concept of an (open) whole and the concept of totality, as the latter plays a not insignificant role in the history of reception across all Marxisms, which undoubtedly places them in the line of traditional philosophy from Plato to Hegel, which ultimately assumed that the whole forms a one, which is then also considered a totality. It was probably Lucretius who was the first philosopher to take a different position, assuming that all those who would claim that the whole is a totality must also assume that nothing at all can escape this whole, whereby, as Hegel also conceded, every phenomenon is or must become an actual phenomenon.

For Lucretius, instead, there is a finite number of types of atoms, while there is an infinite number of atoms with infinite possible combinations, so that all possible combinations are never exhausted in reality. Obviously, it is difference that dominates over identity here, regardless of whether this is defined as form, essence or concept, whereby the whole never forms anything like a totality, because on the one hand it contains virtuality that is not in time, and on the other hand it is itself only a local manifestation of atoms that actualizes some of the possible combinations, i.e. makes them temporal, and not others, which of course also indicates that the whole should be understood as open in principle. Subsequently, in his concept of structure, Deleuze replaced the term totality with totality or the (open) whole, according to which structure only contains a virtual totality that never actualizes itself as a totality, because this would presuppose that a still undifferentiated virtuality would have completely differentiated itself.

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